PUBLIC RELATIONS PAYS DIVIDENDS IN NEW JERSEY

Pre-construction meetings inform all concerned.

One of the most in-depth public relations programs to be attempted by a state department involved in highway construction is meeting with great success in the State of New Jersey. The Department of Transportation has established a Construction Services Unit for liaison between the people and the department with intermediate benefits for local officials, contractors and all interested parties.

Prior to the awarding of a contract, a meeting is held between personnel from the Unit and local officials from the area where the job is to take place to determine any problems that might be encountered and to dispell rumor that usually fly prior to the start of projects. These meetings usually include the local municipal or county engineer, street and highway superintendents, police and anyone else who can contribute information or gain from knowledge of the project. The locations of traffic controls, schools, playgrounds, detours, planned parades, celebrations and just about any other local happenings are checked for coordination.

One of the most important functions of the meeting is to set up an information center where individuals effected by the project can come to get information as to just how they will be helped or inconvenienced. The meeting is usually arranged in a public building where color coded plans and other information are displayed. Representatives of the right-of-way, permits and engineering departments as well as contractor personnel are available to make changes within the authority of those present to "save Mrs. Jones' $3,000 shrubs, relocate her driveway", or whatever might be brought up. Major problems or suggestions are noted and answers are given at a later date. To help publicize this public meeting, cooperation is sought of various local service groups, the chamber of commerce, radio stations and newspapers. The intimate knowledge of the area by local officials makes short work of this chore.

All phases of public relations are utilized to make the forthcoming project work with as few problems as possible. This includes informative newspaper articles, local radio exposure, letters to businessmen and anything else that would come to mind including personal delivery of notices to local merchants as was done during reconstruction of Route 24 in Springfield.

Heading the Construction Services Unit is Max W. Stewart, coordinator. He is assisted by Eugene W. Cornwell, Acting Construction Services Representative and William Nelson, who covers the northeastern section of the State. All three are former project inspectors and well versed in construction and its problems.

A typical example of this coordination, advance planning and public relations program was the work done for the reconstruction of Route 37 in Ocean County. The project called for the dualization and widening of a high volume summertime traffic road leading to the popular New Jersey shore. Affected is a 4.8 mile section running from the Garden State Parkway eastward to Bash Road in Dover Township and Island Heights Borough. The existing road is a two lane portland cement concrete road of early vintage running through a business section of Toms River. It is being reconstructed to a 6-lane divided highway with median and jug handles for turns and crossovers.

Max W. Stewart, program coordinator for N.J. D.O.T. addresses Ocean County Traffic Safety Committee.

Lawrence F. Wagner, county engineer; Eugene W. Cornwell, Max Stewart, both of N.J. D.O.T.; John Fitzgerald, Dover Township police safety officer at preliminary meeting in county engineer's office.

Sol Rabstein, owner of Sanford Chrysler-Plyouth agency discusses the frontage he will lose with police safety officer Henry Dennis and Eugene Cornwell, N.J. D.O.T.

John Fitzgerald, police safety officer, and Eugene Cornwell explain temporary inconvenience to be experienced by Fred Shagner, owner of Zaperts Cocktail Lounge and Liquor Store.

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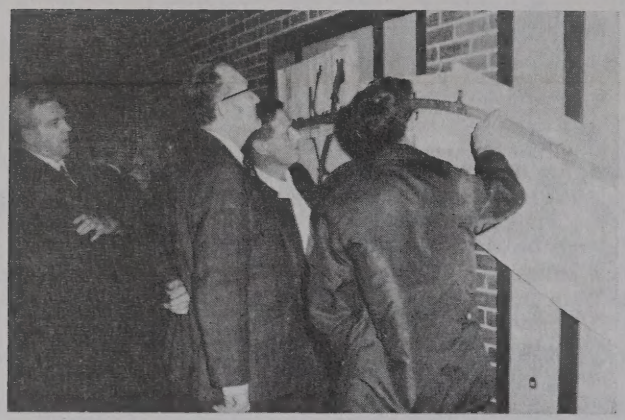
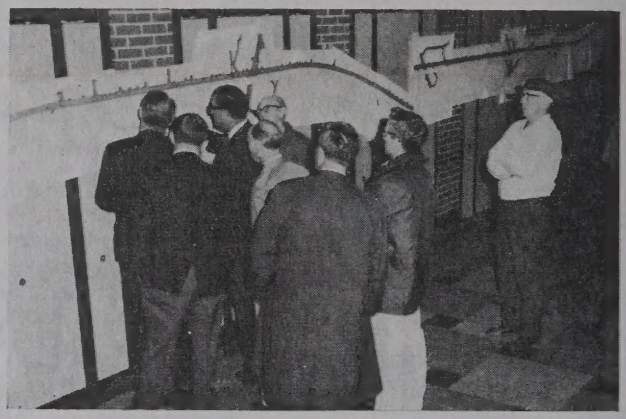
Section of Route 37 in Toms River to be improved.

Flanked by drawings of project, Jack Davis, project superintendent of Stavola Contracting, explains traffic routes at information center.





Interested business owners and private home residents discuss problems at information center set up in local school.

At the time of advertising, interdepartmental meetings were held for a review, understanding and discussion of the impact on the community and George Deter was appointed resident engineer. Then the job of carrying the story to the public began.

Within a week, a meeting was held in the office of Lawrence F. Wagner, Ocean County Engineer to accomplish the local coordination. Present were Messrs. Stewart and Cornwell representing the Department of Transportation, Mr. Wagner and John Fitzgerald, Dover Township Police Safety Officer.

Armed with maps, plans and other information for the occasion, the project staging was explained and discussed. Included were how the existing road will remain open until the new westbound lane is completed and, as sections are completed and crossovers available, the new sections would be utilized by westbound traffic. Upon completion of the entire westbound lanes, all traffic will use the new road while the old one is resurfaced. Also emphasized was the intention to keep all business and homes acessable except for minor delays.

Officer Fitzgerald was able to give an up-to-date inventory of existing traffic lights and other traffic control that could be utilized. In discussion, it was found that businesses on the north side of the road could have access from the rear should there be a need to keep the section closed longer than anticipated. It was discovered the names of seven road and streets had been changed. Also, groundwork was laid for the information center and liaison established with the local chamber of commerce, newspaper and radio station WOBM.

During the same day, Mr. Stewart appeared before the monthly meeting of the Ocean County Traffic Safety Committee and explained the workings of his Unit and explained the details of the Rte. #37 project.

Following bidding and letting to Stavola Contracting Co., Inc., of this $3,621,109 project, a preconstruction meeting was held with all groups involved and the contractor to discuss alternate staging, safety and all other aspects of the project including the manning of the information center scheduled for the afternoon and evening of April 30 in the East Dover Township Elementary School.

Publicity for the project beginning and the information center was coordinated with the chamber of commerce who mailed letters to all their members urging them to attend and to inform acquaintances. Extra letters were included for the purpose. Radio station WOBM carried several spot news announcements. The two newspapers covering the area, The Daily Observer of Toms River and the Asbury Park Press, ran items of interest. Invaluable cooperation was afforded by the Dover Township Safety Bureau. Officers Henry Dennis and John Fitzgerald personally spent many hours to help make the affair a success.

When several hundred persons attended the information center with no great showing of emotion or temper and with many good suggestions discussed, the affair was deemed a success. George Deter, project resident engineer for the state, Jack Davis, Project superintendent for Stavola, and representatives of all interested sections of the Department of Transportation in attendance were very pleased with the acceptance of the expected temporary inconveniences.

The general feeling for the entire program is one of thankfulness, grateful relief and a belief that the Department is "doing a good thing". Contractors also admit the program makes their job considerably easier.

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